

# TOURISM DEVELOPMENT IN THE EAST REGION

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## Abstract

This paper deals with the tourism development of the East Region of the Republic of North Macedonia. The development of tourism is important for every region, especially in the economic aspect. Tourism empowers the local economy, creates new jobs, influences the regulation of infrastructure, etc. The East region with its geographical position, dynamic relief structure, suitable climate, water resources, high diversity and endemism of plants and animals, various anthropogenic motives, and others create a solid basis for the development of several types of tourism in this region, that can help to turn this region into an interesting tourist destination.

The focus of the paper will be the natural tourist motives (mountains, valleys, lakes, rivers) and anthropogenic touristic motives (archaeological sites, museums, religious objects, manifestations) of this area, alternative forms of tourism that can be developed in this region based on its potential, the number of tourists in the period 2017-2022 and accommodation capacities in the East Region.

*Keywords: East Region, tourist motives, alternative tourism, number of tourists, etc.*

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## 1. Introduction

Tourism is one of the most massive socio-economic phenomena in the world. In 1941, Hunziker and Kraft defined tourism as the sum of phenomena and relations arising from the travel and stay of non-residents, in so far as they do not lead to permanent residence and are not related to any gainful activity.

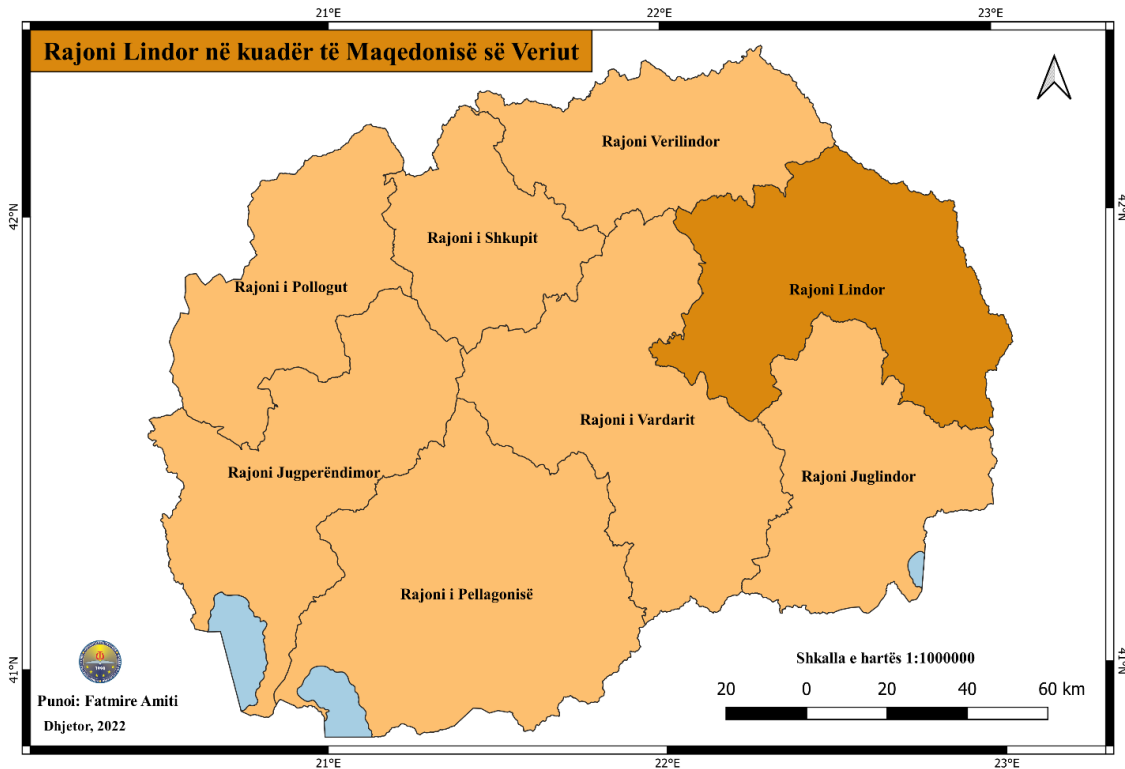
Although various data show that tourism has existed as a phenomenon since ancient times, its development began in the 7th century. Today it is one of the most profitable industries and its impact is felt across the globe.

For easier planning, the Republic of North Macedonia is divided into 8 statistical regions. Our focus in this paper will be the East Region, namely the development of tourism in this region. The region offers numerous opportunities for building authentic recreational, alternative, rural, religious, transit, and tourism. Even though the region has many natural and cultural potentials, tourism is not sufficiently developed.

## 2. Geographical position, borders, size and communication links of the territory of the East Region of the Republic of North Macedonia

The East Region is located in the eastern part of the Republic of North Macedonia. It has an area of 3,537 km<sup>2</sup> and includes 13.8% of the country's territory. [2] It lies in the northern latitude of 41°27'14.56" and 42°9'18.90" and the eastern longitude of 21°48'28.50" to 23°23.27".

The border in the east coincides with the state border with Bulgaria, in the north it borders with the Northeast Region, in the west with the Vardar Region and the south with the Southeast Region.



**Figure 6.** Map of the geographical position of the East Region

Such a geographical position has several advantages in terms of tourism, such as: Four municipalities from the East Region: Berovo, Delcevo, Makedonska Kamenica, and Pehcevoare located on the border with Bulgaria, a country that is a member of the European Union. It is located about 100 km away from the capital of NMK. It is located about 90 km away from the largest "International Airport" in our country. The most important international road corridor to the Republic of Bulgaria and the transverse corridor from Kumanovo through Stip to Strumica passes through EPR. The region has a good network of paved roads almost to every village. On the other hand, there are some disadvantages: The East Region still lacks a modern and fast traffic artery that would connect the municipalities and the region with Bulgaria. Although the length of the region's border with the Bulgarian state is 100 km long, there is only one "Delcevo" crossing with poor passenger traffic due to poor traffic connections. It is relatively far from the main corridor in North Macedonia K-10 (50-100 km). The most visited tourist areas in North Macedonia such as: Ohrid, Skopje, Dojran, Sharr Mountain, Mavrovo, are significantly further from EPR. This, together with the state of the traffic connection, has a negative impact on the offer of two-day tours or optional tourist routes from the main centers to the East Region.

### **3. Physical-geographic characteristics of the Eastern Region of the Republic of North Macedonia as tourist motives**

*3.1. Relief features and their impact on tourism:* The relief in the East Region has a dynamic structure, which is represented by plain parts such as the Ovce Pole field, the total surface of which is 2,162 km<sup>2</sup>, with an average altitude of 350 m, as well as Ezhevo Pole. Due to the different geological compositions and the great erosive energy of Bregalnica and its tributaries, the rivers have formed a large number of picturesque valleys with quite interesting views and canyon parts in the area of EPR, such as the valleys along the Bregalnica River, the Valley of Pijanec, Malishevo Valley, Berovo Valley, etc. [5] The mountainous relief occupies 56% of the area of the region, there are 10 mountains here: Obozna Golak, Bejaz Tepe, Plačkovica, Ograzhden, Vlaina, Maleshevo Mountains, Goten, Serta, Manogovica and Osogovo Mountains, where the highest peak of the region is found, Ruen, it stands at 2,252 m above sea level.

*3.2. Climatic characteristics and their impact on tourism:* The region is characterized by hot and dry summers, temperatures during this season can reach up to 41°C, while winters are cold and with moderate rainfall with rare occurrences of extremely low temperatures that go down to -22°C. The average annual temperature is 12.9°C.

[2] The average amount of precipitation is 543.7 mm. The maximum is reached in the months of April-May, and the minimum in the summer months of July-August.

The duration of solar radiation is 2,100 to 2,300 hours per year.

*3.3. Hydrographic features and their impact on tourism:* The hydrographic network of the East Region is rich in many waters, such as surface water, as well as underground water.

There are about 700 watercourses, 6 of which are longer than 20 km. [2] Bregalnica is the left branch and at the same time the biggest branch of Vardar.

It originates in the Maleshevo mountains at an altitude of 1,720 m. The overall length of the Bregalnica River is 225 km. Its most important branches are: the river of Kocani and the river of Sveti Nikole on the right side, while on the left side are Osnjica, Kriva Llakavica and Zrnovska.

There are 26 lakes of which 4 are small natural lakes, 4 larger reservoirs, 4 small reservoirs and 15 micro-reservoirs.

In the East Region, there are also three thermomineral baths. The bath of Kezovica is located on the right side of the Bregalnica River, 2 km away from the town of Stip. The temperature of the springs of this bath is 57°C, while the output is 7 l/sec. The bath of Banjë village (Bath of Kocan), the village of Banje itself got its name from the bathhouse and the warm water springs in the village. It is located 7 km from Kočan. The water temperature is 64°C. Here is also the Bath of Istbanja, located in the village of the same name, near Kocan. Known as the first thermal-mineral bath in North Macedonia, since these springs have been used as a health bath since ancient times. The waters of this bath have a temperature of 65°C.

*3.4. Flora and fauna of East Region:* More than 27% of the region, especially the upper parts, is covered with mixed deciduous forests (oak and beech), which are habitats rich in biodiversity. The level of endemism in the area is expected to be high, e.g. only in the Osogovo Mountains, about 1000 species of plants have been identified.

[8] The fish fauna in the Bregalnica River consists of more than 25 species. There are about 25 species of reptiles in RL such as: Herman's tortoise, Balkan green lizard, European blind snake, horned snake, etc. The total number of bird species present in the Eastern Region has not yet been estimated. The most special species are: the Egyptian vulture, the levant sparrow hawk, the short-toed snake eagle, the eastern imperial eagle, the golden eagle, etc.

#### **4. Development of tourism in the East Region of the Republic of North Macedonia**

Geographical position, scenic nature, relief, biogeographic diversity, as well as numerous anthropogenic motives create a solid basis for the development of several types of tourism in this region and it can turn into an interesting tourist destination.

[4] According to the SWOT analyzes carried out in this region on tourism, they have found some strong points which, if used properly, will have a great impact on the development of tourism in the East Region.

- The location of the region and the dynamic structure of the relief and the cultural and historical legacies
- Endogenous potential of the region present through climatic and land conditions.
- The existence of the Faculty of Tourism at "Goce Dellchev" University

The biggest weaknesses that affect the development of tourism in this region mostly have to do with the way tourism is organized.

- It does not cooperate with other regions for the mutual development of tourism
- The condition of accommodation facilities in most of the region is bad
- The historical, natural and cultural potential has not been sufficiently exploited.
- The tourist sites are not properly maintained
- The local population lacks education for the preservation of natural beauty and historical relics
- Low investments in tourism innovations and modernization
- Poorly developed infrastructure hinders tourism development
- Not having any marketing activity for the promotion of the region in touristic offers

#### **5. Anthropogenic tourism motives**

[1] Almost every tourist stay in the world is based, in addition to natural motifs, also on cultural motifs, which give tourist circulations a more complex physiognomy and create conditions for a longer stay in a tourist place, thus being associated with direct effects on the structure and increase in tourist consumption.

*5.1. Archaeological sites:* According to the archaeological map of NMK, the East Region is rich in localities, there are about 600 archaeological localities. [10] There are 135 archaeological sites in the vicinity of Stip, 111 in the vicinity of Kocan, 42 in Probishtip, 94 in Berovo, 97 in Vinica and 112 in Delcevo. The most popular archaeological sites in EPR are Bargala, VinicaCastle, Grnčarica, Krupistja, Morodvisi, etc.

4.2. *Events*: Over 30 different events are organized in the East Region during the year. The most distinguished is the "Cetrse" custom in Stip is the first intangible cultural heritage from North Macedonia on the representative list of UNESCO's world intangible cultural heritage. This centuries-old custom is carried out during the religious holiday "Saint Forty Martyrs" on March 22 when people of all ages climb the Isar and greet at least 40 people along the way.

4.3. *Museums*: In the EPR there is a large number of museums, some of them are: City Museum – Stip. The Institute and Museum of Stip was formed in 1950 as the Institute of the city and later in 1955 it was transformed into the Museum of the area of Stip. [6] The museum has several collections and funds from the field of archaeology, ethnology, history, history or art.

The ethno-house in the village of Morodvis in the municipality of Zrnovci has recently been opened and it exhibits objects that have been used for centuries by the local population.

Ethno house and city museum in Kocan. It exhibits photographs and authentic traditional objects that unfold the daily life of the population in this location.

The Museum of Vinica is located in the center of the city. In this museum there is the largest collection of terracotta icons of North Macedonia. They were created in the pottery workshop at the archaeological site Vinica Castle in the Middle Ages and they testify to the high artistic achievements of Christian art in North Macedonia.

4.4. *Religious objects*: There are 36 churches and monasteries in the region, some of them are centuries old, such as: "Saint George" Church in the village of Gorni Kozjak - Karbinici, one of the oldest churches in the whole republic, dating from the XI or XII century. "St. Pantelejmon" monastery - Pantelej village, built towards the end of the XIX century. The women's monastery "Saint Spiridon the Miraculous" - Probishtip, built in the 13th century. The monastery of Lesnova, dating from 1341, etc. These churches and monasteries are important cultural heritage. A larger number of them contain masterpieces of paintings, icons, architecture, etc.

There are also four mosques here: "Muhammed Aga Mosque" was built in 1668. "Sultan Fatih Mehmet" Mosque in Dellchevo built in 1448. "Kadin Aga" Mosque in Shtip from the 19th century. "Husamedin Pasha" mosque in Shtip.

Based on natural and anthropogenic potentials that EPR has there can be developed some forms of alternative tourism such as: Mountain tourism, rural tourism, curative tourism, fishing and hunting, winter sports tourism, lake tourism, cultural tourism, religious tourism, tourism of events, mountaineering etc.

## 5. Tourist zoning of EPR

[5] Based on existing natural, demographic, and cultural resources, there are currently 6 tourist areas or sub-regions in EPR, each with its uniqueness and characteristics such as:

- Stip area (known for shopping, bathing, hunting and cultural facilities)
- Kocani field (gastronomy)
- Osogovo area (winter sports, mountain ecotourism)
- Pijanec area (lakes, hunting, folklore, customs)
- Maleshevo area (sports-recreational, gastronomy)
- Plackovic area (recreation, mountains, and ecotourism)

## 6. The number of tourists in the East Region of the Republic of North Macedonia

Tourism is important as it helps in the economic development of the country, especially in the countries that are developing, therefore it should be given importance through the maintenance and regulation of tourist potentials and not only, but also the infrastructure, marketing of tourist places, etc. so that there are as many tourists as possible.

[9] The largest number of tourists was in the 80s of the last century, later the number decreased. There was a small number of tourists in 2001 as a result of the armed conflict that occurred in R.M.V. when the Eastern Region had 12,762 tourists, of which only 2,457 were foreigners. After that, the number of tourists began to increase gradually.

**Table 4.** The progress of the number of tourists in the NMK and the East Region in the period 2017-2022

		2017	2018	2019	2020	2021	2022
<b>NMK</b>	Tourists						
	Domestic	368 247	419 590	427 370	349 308	293 963	431 841
	Foreign	630 594	707 345	757 593	118 206	408 500	537 436
	Total	998 841	1 126 935	1 184 963	467 514	702 463	969 277
<b>EPR</b>							
	Domestic	19 947	20 490	17 657	16 124	16 269	16 911
	Foreign	11 828	13 864	14 420	3 089	6 481	5 749
	Total	31 775	34 354	32 077	19 213	22 750	22 660

Source: stat.gov.mk

As a result of the COVID-19 pandemic, there was a large decrease in the number of tourists in 2020, and 2021, especially foreign tourists were very few as international travel was not allowed for many months. The tourism sector suffered huge losses during this period, so many of the accommodation facilities for tourists were closed. Although the authorities tried to take some measures to mitigate the financial loss that the hoteliers had, they were not enough.

**Table 5.** The number of overnight stays by tourists in the period 2017-2022

		2017	2018	2019	2020	2021	2022
<b>NMK</b>	Domestic	1,480,460	1,685,273	1,684,627	1,444,605	1,643,083	1,703,841
	Foreign	1,491,535	1,491,535	1,577,771	252,930	670,460	1,144,763
	Total	<b>2,775,152</b>	<b>3,176,808</b>	<b>3,262,398</b>	<b>1,697,535</b>	<b>2,313,543</b>	<b>2,848,604</b>
<b>EPR</b>	Domestic	38 320	39 591	34 547	34 609	31 698	31,578
	Foreign	24 637	29 828	28 331	8 745	15 085	12,701
	Total	<b>62 957</b>	<b>69 419</b>	<b>62 878</b>	<b>43 354</b>	<b>46 783</b>	<b>44,279</b>
<b>EPR in the state framework</b>		<b>2.26%</b>	<b>2.18%</b>	<b>1.92%</b>	<b>2.55%</b>	<b>2.02%</b>	<b>1.55%</b>

Source: stat.gov.mk

According to statistics, domestic tourists usually stay in this region for about two days, and foreign tourists for about three days.

## 7. Accommodation capacities in the East Region of the Republic of North Macedonia

[6 ] The capacity for accommodation and food of tourists has a great impact on the volume of tourist traffic in tourist places. Special attention is paid to the facilities for accommodation and food for tourists.

**Table 6.** Accommodation capacities by type in the East Planning Region for 2010

Object type	Number of objects	Number of apartments	Number of beds
<b>Total</b>	23	65	1499
<b>Total hotels</b>	9	39	514
<b>Hotel *****</b>	/	/	/
<b>Hotel *****</b>	/	/	/
<b>Hotel ***</b>	2	16	161
<b>Hotel **</b>	3	12	129
<b>Hotel *</b>	4	11	224
<b>Motel</b>	1	3	60
<b>Facilities near the termo mineral baths</b>	1	/	33
<b>Workers' resorts</b>	2	/	114
<b>Resorts for children and young people</b>	3	5	538
<b>Uncategorized objects</b>	7	18	240

Source: [www.eastregion.mk](http://www.eastregion.mk).

[9] It is noted that the largest participation in the total number of accommodation facilities is of hotels and uncategorized facilities. This also applies to the number of apartments, where hotels have a total of 39 apartments and uncategorized facilities have 18 apartments.

## 8. Conclusion

The region offers numerous opportunities for the development of several types of tourism, but unfortunately, very few types are present like that: rural, tourism of manifestations, and archeology.

Many other types, although they have the conditions, are not present or are not developed enough. Religious tourism is not at all present even though there are about 40 religious objects in the region. In addition to many others such as gastronomy tourism, mountain biking, paragliding, and motorcycle tourism, winter sports tourism is very little present with only one skiing center "Ponikva".

It is necessary to take measures on the part of the administrative bodies of the region as well as on the part of the central government, to use all the touristic capacities of the region, this would bring higher economic income, new jobs, etc.

- First of all, it is necessary to promote the tourist attractions of the Eastern Region more
- It is necessary to educate the population about the importance of tourism development.
- Maintain existing accommodation facilities and build new ones.
- To organize various workshops to promote the artisanal products, gastronomy of the region, etc.
- Hiring professionals and marketing agencies, for events that can grow at the national and international level, etc.

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